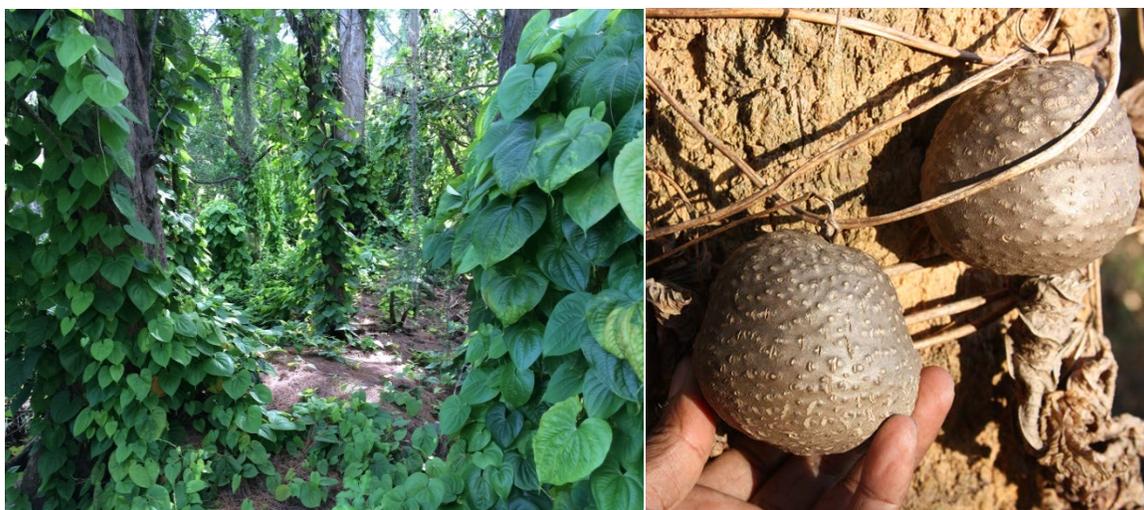




Air Potato – Not Your Ordinary Potato

(Author's Note: This is the sixteenth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)

One of Florida's most troublesome invaders is the "air potato", (*Dioscorea bulbifera*), a member of the family of the true yams. Air potato, like most yams, is a vine which cannot support its own weight. In order to capture sunlight, the air potato ascends by twining and climbing other plants. Air potato forms dense canopies that can shade out vegetation, and cause the collapse of native plants. It can grow up to 70 feet in one season, starting from the previous season's tubers. These tubers, also referred to as bulbils, closely resemble potatoes, and grow attached to stems; appearing in mid-summer and falling to the ground in late fall when the vines die back. The potatoes lie dormant until the following spring when they sprout, and begin the cycle again.



Left: Air potato vine overtaking the surrounding vegetation. Right: Air potato tubers or bulbils.
Photo Credit: City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department and Lee County IFAS Extension

Found in Asia, Africa, and the United States, air potatoes thrive all over Florida, which of course, includes Sanibel Island. Sanibel has included air potato on its list of regulated invasive, exotic plants. These plants must be removed when a property is developed, and the property must be maintained free of these invasive, exotics in perpetuity.

Unfortunately, air potatoes are extremely difficult to eradicate. Herbicides, such as "Brush-B-Gone", do temporarily halt the growth of the vine, but require repeated applications and careful protection of desirable neighboring plants. Hand picking the potatoes and digging up the roots may slow down next year's vines and crop tubers, but a few missed tubers can mean failure. **Do not** dispose of potatoes or vines in vegetative waste.

The best hope for stopping this creeping vine, which can quickly suffocate trees and bushes, appears to be a tiny red and black beetle (*Liloceris cheni* or Lili beetle) with a voracious appetite for air potato leaves. Since releasing several hundred thousand beetles, Florida has seen a significant reduction in these vines. Beetles are available to residents and municipalities, free of charge, from the Florida Department of Agriculture (<http://bcrc1.ifas.ufl.edu/airpotatofiles/airpotatoforms.shtml>).



Lili Beetles snacking on an air potato leaf.

Photo Credit: City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department

To view pictures of these plants or the City's "The Alien Invasion" brochure, visit the City's website at <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources/Vegetation-Information/Exotic-Vegetation/Other-Invasive-Exotic-Vegetation> or contact the City's Natural Resources Department at 472-3700.

To read other Vegetation Committee articles in this series please visit the City of Sanibel's Natural Resources Department website: <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources>